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Gemeinsame Erklärung zur Rechtfertigungslehre:
Ein Kommentar*

JOINT DECLARATION
ON THE DOCTRINE OF
JUSTIFICATION

A
Commentary
by the Institute for Ecumenical Research, Strasbourg

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FOREWORD

The "Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification" (JD) is the fruit of many Lutheran-Roman Catholic dialogues that have occurred over the last thirty years on both the world and regional levels. It represents a new step along the path of Lutheran-Catholic ecumenism. Important results of dialogues are gathered together in the JD in a way that permits the churches to respond in an official and binding way. The JD is an attempt to move from dialogue results to an official declaration of consensus by the churches.

The Lutheran World Federation has asked its member churches to respond to the JD by Summer 1998. This request sets in motion the process that will lead to an official judgment. The Institute for Ecumenical Research in Strasbourg wishes to aid this process by means of this Commentary. This Commentary represents the opinion of the Institute staff and is not a statement of the LWF. It seeks to describe the background and goal of the JD in an open and comprehensive way and to lay out objectively its theological content.

This text has three parts. The first section, "Introduction and Summary," gives an overview of the JD that orients those who know little about the JD to what it says and means. The second section, "Commentary," then offers a detailed tour of the main theological chapters of the JD. Sub-sections are devoted to systematic-theological discussions of the Preamble (JD 1-7) and the paragraphs on the biblical message of justification (JD 8-12). The chapters of the JD on the common understanding of justification (JD 14-18) and on the elaboration of this understanding (JD 19-44) are then given a close reading. In the third section, the text of the JD and its Appendix of Sources is reproduced.

Strasbourg, May 1997

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INTRODUCTION AND SUMMARY

The causes which led to the division of the Western church in the sixteenth century were many sided: historical, economic, and social. Decisive, however, were differing and opposed understandings of the one gospel of Jesus Christ, the gospel which proclaims and mediates the justification of the sinner before God by grace alone, through faith in the saving act of Christ.

Although the Reformation did not seek to divide the church, such a division was its result. Separate and competing churches came into existence. Lutherans and Catholics each condemned the doctrine of the other. These condemnations are in official texts and still in force. They are not least concerned with the churches' teaching on justification.

Efforts made during the sixteenth century to establish unity were unsuccessful. After centuries of division, opposition, and also growing mutual indifference, the churches in this century have been given the possibility of taking new steps toward one another. The results of the ecumenical movement have for many proved insufficient, but this movement has led to a true convergence and in many places to important steps toward reconciliation.

The JD is an important milestone along this joyful yet difficult path. This commentary seeks to present in a brief space its origin, content, significance and scope.

A. THE CONTEXT AND ORIGIN OF THE JD

The modern ecumenical movement is a gift of God to the church. In common listening to the Word of God, common prayer, common engagement in the world and, increasingly often, common celebration of the sacraments, many Christians in many lands and on all planes of church life have been able in the Holy Spirit to experience that they belong to the one holy church of Jesus Christ.

B. THE COMMON UNDERSTANDING OF JUSTIFICATION

The JD does not contain everything that either church teaches about justification. It could be extended to deal with various additional themes (e.g., the understanding of the cross and resurrection of Jesus). It also does not explore the consequences that follow from a common understanding of justification for social ethics or for our teaching about the church. It consciously limits itself to the understanding of justification itself. It is a first step which must be followed by others. In this particular area, a breakthrough is achieved: the JD represents a consensus in the basic truths of the doctrine of justification (JD 5).

B1. A common listening to the Word of God in the Bible is the essential foundation for the JD. Both the message of the Old Testament and the various New Testaments descriptions of salvation in Christ are mentioned and briefly interpreted (JD 8-12). The New Testament speaks about the saving action of God in diverse ways. The JD gives a prominent place to Paul's discussions. For Paul, justification is the forgiveness of sins, liberation from the dominating power of sin and from the curse of the law. It is acceptance into communion with God. The justified live by the faith which comes from the Word of God and is effective in love, the fruit of the Spirit.

B2. Against this biblical background, the Lutheran and Catholic churches have reached a common understanding of the basic truths of the doctrine of justification. "By grace alone, in faith in Christ's saving work, and not because of any merit on our part, we are accepted by God and receive the Holy Spirit, who renews our hearts while equipping and calling us to good works" (JD 15). "Faith is itself a God's gift through the Holy Spirit who works through word and sacrament in the community of believers and who, at the same time, leads believers into that renewal of life which God will bring to completion in eternal life" (JD 16, cp. 14-17).

B3. A significant consensus is also reached in the relative significance of the doctrine of justification, a question of great importance for the Lutheran perspective. The doctrine of justification is not simply one article of Christian teaching, but an indispensable criterion which serves to orient all the teaching and practice of our churches toward Christ (JD 18). It is central to the internal connections that bind together all the truths of the faith. In these assertions, the special concern of the Lutheran Reformation is extensively accepted (see JD, 1,2).

C. THE ELABORATION OF THE COMMON UNDERSTANDING AND THE RESOLUTION OF THE CONTROVERSIES OF THE PAST

The next step is testing whether this common understanding holds up in relation to the individual questions which proved particularly difficult during the Reformation and were the subject of doctrinal condemnations. In the process, it becomes clear that:

- Against the background of the consensus in basic truths, the differing theological formulations of the two traditions appear in a new light. They are not church dividing.
- The same subject matter can be approached in different ways. This difference is not a problem, because the consensus can be elaborated in differing ways (JD 19-39).

C1. The common statement that sinners cannot by themselves turn to God seeking deliverance, merit justification before God, or attain salvation by their own abilities defuses the well-known dispute over a possible contribution by persons to their own justification, although Catholics and Lutherans express this point in their own languages, with their own special accents (JD 19-21).

C2. The JD emphasizes that the forgiveness of sins cannot be separated from making the sinner righteous and that, within our participation in Christ, the Holy Spirit works in us an active love.

It is thus clear that for both traditions, God's justification includes the renewal of the Christian's life. An old misunderstanding is here overcome (JD 22-24).

C3. It is thus also made clear that **justification by grace and through faith in no way excludes the good works of the Christian**. The Christian must not remain without good works, but these never merit justification or form its basis (JD 25-27).

C4. The Lutheran statement (usually rejected by Catholics) that the justified Christian remains a sinner still leads to differing interpretations. Nevertheless, what is agreed here must not be overlooked: **the justified are not removed from the pressing power and attack of sin and must daily pray to God for forgiveness**. They are constantly called again to conversion and penance. The enslaving power of sin is broken, however, because it is "ruled" by Christ. As forgiven sin, it no longer separates the person from God (JD 28-30).

C5. On the basis of the common conviction that Christ has fulfilled the law and by his death and resurrection overcome it as a way to salvation, Catholics and Lutherans together emphasize that **justification is not dependent on the works of the law. This does not mean, however, that the commandments are no longer valid**. Rather, they express the will of God, as Christ did also in a special way in his words and life (JD 31-33).

C6. The old dispute whether the **Christian can be assured of salvation** is overcome by the common affirmation that believers can depend on the promise of God. Assurance exists only in trust in God's pledge, but not when one looks at one's own weakness and shortcomings. Thus, assurance cannot become a false security (JD 34-36).

C7. The common emphasis that **works of love arise from the justification of the Christian** defuses the problem of merit. Even though the term "merit" continues to be used by Catholic

theology, it is not denied that justification, even in its completion in heaven, remains an unmerited gift of grace. Lutherans also speak of a growth of the Christian in grace and faith, although they stress that the righteousness which belongs to the Christian by participation in Christ is always complete (JD 37-39).

D. THE SIGNIFICANCE AND SCOPE OF THE CONSENSUS REACHED IN THE JD

The significance and import of the consensus reached cannot yet be foreseen in detail. The individual churches are now called to a decision. They (and that means each of us) must test this consensus and draw consequences from it. The consensus must have an impact on and be tested in the life of the churches (JD 43). Four areas are emphasized in the understanding put forward by the JD:

D1. A first area is **the understanding of consensus** used within the JD. Lutherans and Catholics are together convinced that a common understanding of justification is foundational and indispensable for the unity of the church. A consensus in basic truths, however, need not mean uniformity. The elaboration of the consensus is open to differences in language, theological formulation, and historical experience (JD 14). Here we must always test whether the differences correspond to the consensus and are compatible with it (JD 18-39). If so, then the elaborations are "open to one another" in their differences (JD 40). This working method of the JD points toward a fruitful way of understanding unity and uniformity in the church.

D2. The JD seeks to establish that **the doctrinal condemnations of the sixteenth century do not apply to the doctrine of the churches presented in the JD**. The phrase "lifting the condemnations" should be avoided, since it is open to misunderstandings. The new evaluation of the condemnations does not mean that our histories are treated lightly (JD 7, 42) or that the condemnations are

being set aside as a mistake of the past. Even though they sometimes represented misunderstandings, their guiding concern was the gospel of the saving action of God. Some of the condemnations were not simply pointless (JD 42). False teachings were and are heresies to be rejected. New insights and new developments, however, require that we re-examine the old judgments. The question is whether such false teaching is today to be found in the doctrine of the other church. The JD states the conviction that the doctrine of the Lutheran church presented in the JD is not touched by the condemnations put forward by the Council of Trent and that the doctrine of the Roman Catholic Church presented in the JD is not touched by the condemnations included in the Lutheran Confessions. The JD declares: these condemnations do not apply to the contemporary churches' understandings of justification here presented.

D3. To accept the conclusions of the JD (40-41) is also to accept **an obligation to continue the dialogue**. The JD is a basic and decisive step. Nevertheless, it does not yet lead to communion (e.g., to a common celebration of the Eucharist). The consensus in justification now needs to be extended, especially in its ecclesiological and social-ethical consequences. The JD itself names some important issues: church, authority, ministry, sacraments, the relation between justification and social ethics. The common understanding of justification presented in the JD offers a solid basis for this further work (JD 43).

D4. Before this can occur, however, **the consensus presented in the JD must be received by the churches**. An acceptance of the JD would be the first common, official response to the Lutheran-Catholic dialogue by the two churches since the dialogue began thirty years ago. The churches are asked to respond in a binding way and thus to harvest the fruits of these years of effort. On the Lutheran side, the churches responded to a first draft of the JD

distributed to them in 1995 with much agreement, but also with important suggestions for improvement. These were worked into the present text now being presented to the churches. If the churches accept it, they will be committing themselves to drawing consequences from this consensus for their teaching and life.

COMMENTARY

GOAL AND BACKGROUND OF THE DECLARATION (JD 1-7)

The "Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification" (JD) presents a fundamental agreement on the doctrine of justification between the Lutheran and Roman Catholic Churches. With the help of this agreement, the existing condemnations on justification between the two churches are then declared not to apply to the churches today. Here, we will a) first describe what is meant by the condemnations mentioned in JD 1 and 5 and how the JD deals with them. b) We will then explain the decision the JD asks the churches to make about these condemnations. c) Third, we will address some basic questions that have arise in the course of the discussion. d) Finally, the background of the JD will be discussed (cp. JD 3, 6).

a) The teaching of the Lutheran church is based on Holy Scripture and expressed in a binding way in the ecumenical creeds and in the confessions of the sixteenth century. Among the confessions, the Smalcald Articles and the Formula of Concord especially contain condemnations directed at what Lutherans have considered false teachings of the Roman Catholic Church. In addition, the Augsburg Confession contains rejections of erroneous doctrine. As footnote 3 of the JD notes, different Lutheran churches subscribe to different confessions. As a result, the condemnations dealt with in the JD are not in their binding confessions of all of the Lutheran churches in the same way.

JD deals only with the doctrine of justification. The Lutheran Confessions also contain other doctrinal condemnations, e.g., concerning the sacraments or ministry. In addition, the Council of Trent sometimes condemned statements by Luther which are not to be found in the Confessions. The Catholic condemnations are to

be found in canons 1-33 of the Decree on Justification of the Council of Trent. The canons all follow the form: "Whoever says, . . . let him be condemned [*anathema sit*]."

Can we today formulate a common declaration that will not contain opinions rejected by either side, but will also contain the central content of the biblical message of justification? If so, then we could say: "This declaration witnesses to our agreement; its teaching is not touched by the old condemnations." Such an agreement would be one that is not called into question by the old condemnations.

The JD follows such a strategy. The goal of the document is to present a consensus in the basic truths of the doctrine of justification. In JD 40-41, it is asserted that such an agreement is in fact presented in JD 14-39 and that this agreement comes under neither the condemnations in the Lutheran Confessions nor those of the Council of Trent.

The concept "basic truths" (JD 5, 13) relates to this agreement on content. This phrase does not take up the Catholic theory of a "hierarchy of truths," nor does it point to a merely experiential or existential "ground" in opposition to a doctrinal "expression." The "basic truths" are statements of faith which Catholics and Lutherans can together affirm. In the JD they normally are introduced with the words "We confess together . . ." The concept of "basic truths" points to the existence of different confessional elaborations that go beyond what is said together. These do not endanger, however, the agreement in what is fundamental. These different elaborations are explicitly mentioned in the JD as specifically Lutheran or Catholic understandings. Often, these are mentioned in the form: "When the one side emphasizes something, it does not deny what is important for the other side."

b) What are the Lutheran churches now to do with the JD? The Lutheran World Federation has asked them the following question:

Does your church accept the conclusions reached in paragraphs 40 and 41 of the JD and thus join in affirming that, because of the agreement on the fundamental meaning and truth of our justification in Christ to which the JD testifies, the condemnations regarding justification in the Lutheran Confessions do not apply to the teaching on justification of the Roman Catholic Church presented in the JD? (in a letter from General Secretary Ishmael Noko to the LWF member churches, February 27, 1997)

The JD seeks to "testify" to and document this agreement. The existing consensus relates to the "fundamental truth" of our justification. On this basis the condemnations are declared inapplicable to the partner church today, although differences of opinion continue to exist between ideas specific to each confession. If the churches can answer this question positively, they should make an official statement through whatever structure they possess for speaking on doctrinal questions.

For the Catholic Church, the JD does not yet make possible altar fellowship with the Lutheran churches. The Catholic Church does not believe that the recognition of the Lutheran doctrine of justification presented in the JD allows it to invite Lutherans to the Lord's Supper. Other doctrinal questions must be settled first. The Lutheran churches will need themselves to decide what consequences they will draw from the recognition of the Catholic understanding of justification presented in the JD.

c) Is the goal stated in the cited letter from General Secretary Noko historically, theologically, and constitutionally legitimate? In the course of discussions of the JD, a series of questions have arisen, which here can only be briefly noted in five areas:

1. The confessional texts will not themselves be changed. The condemnations remain in force, even if they do not touch the contemporary partner church. The JD is not itself a new confession, but rather documents our present understanding. Nothing is being added to or removed from the confessions. The question is

For the extension of church fellowship beyond the Lutheran family the only prerequisite should be a basic agreement on the gospel and the sacraments according to the Scriptures (*satis est*, CA VII)" (*Sent Into the World: Evian 1970*, Proceedings of the 5th Assembly of the LWF, p. 77).

This so-called "satis-est" principle has determined the LWF agenda in the dialogues and has given a central position to the doctrine of justification. In applying this "satis-est" principle, the Lutheran churches have understood the right preaching of the gospel and administration of the sacraments as that which corresponds to and mediates the message of justification.

The central position of the doctrine of justification as the content of the right proclamation of the gospel can be observed in all the dialogues pursued by the LWF. This understanding of justification is particularly clear in the Lutheran-Roman Catholic dialogue. The JD is a decisive step along this path. When we look back within the Lutheran discussions to Helsinki 1963, we can say that the difficulties experienced there have not led to a rejection of theological reflection on the doctrine of justification. In the bilateral dialogues, the doctrine of justification has been a decisive ecumenical theme for Lutherans.

As is noted in JD 3, the JD rests especially on three dialogue texts: 1) the international dialogue between the Roman Catholic Church and the Lutheran World Federation; 2) the Lutheran-Catholic dialogue in North America; and 3) the study of the doctrinal condemnations by the Ecumenical Study Group of Protestant and Catholic Theologians [in Germany], working under the mandate of the [German] Joint Ecumenical Commission.

In the international dialogue, significant agreement on the doctrine of justification was already registered in the 1972 Malta Report (in *Growth in Agreement*, 1984, pp. 168-189). It stated that "justifica-

tion can be understood as expressing the totality of the event of salvation" (27). In addition, "a far-reaching consensus is developing in the interpretation of justification" (26). The Malta Report did not, however, spell out this consensus. It was only said that the Catholic theologians "also emphasize . . . that God's gift of salvation for the believer is unconditional as far as human accomplishments are concerned." Lutherans then stated that they do not understand justification as "a purely external declaration of the justification of the sinner," but rather see the righteousness of God as an encompassing reality "basic to the new life of the believer" (26).

The recent document *Church and Justification* (1984) was primarily concerned with the consequences of an agreement on justification for the doctrine of the church. The document opens with a common affirmation about justification:

Catholics and Lutherans in common believe in the triune God who for Christ's sake justifies sinners by grace through faith and makes them members of the church in baptism (1).

The LWF as a partner in the international dialogue cannot itself make binding decisions for the Lutheran churches. Authority in relation to doctrinal questions rests with the individual churches. On the national level, a few Lutheran churches have taken binding action on dialogue results. Until now, corresponding action on the Catholic side has been lacking. One example of a dialogue officially received by the Lutheran side is mentioned in footnote 8 of the JD. The Evangelical Church in Germany (including more than just Lutherans) responded in a binding way to the dialogue in Germany which led to the text *The Condemnations of the Reformation Era: Do They Still Divide?* (1989). This dialogue took up not only justification but also sacraments and ministry. The question of the doctrinal condemnations was given a contemporary relevance by this dialogue and the JD in both its method and its content built extensively on its experience and results.

The German dialogue summarized its results:

Where the interpretation of the justification of the sinner is concerned, the mutual sixteenth-century condemnations which we have discussed no longer apply to our partner today in any sense that could divide the churches (*Condemnations*, p. 68).

The dialogue did not assert that total agreement existed today in relation to justification. Differences were noted, but they are:

not decisive questions of such a kind that the answer to them would decide about the true and false church. In other words they are not such that with them "the church stand and falls" (*ibid.*)

This procedure corresponds to that of the JD; it attempts to discover an agreement in that which is fundamental. One must thus weigh whether the remaining differences in fact deal with "decisive questions" or are borne by the established consensus in such a way that they do not have church-dividing effect.

The *Condemnations* study pursued the various controversies and condemnations in detail and came to a series of historical and theological judgments which added up to the cited conclusion. The American text *Justification by Faith* worked with a different method but was extensively similar in content. This rather long text discussed the controversies of the Reformation era from various perspectives. It concluded with a common declaration, which stated that all are through Jesus Christ

called to pass from alienation and oppression to sin to freedom and fellowship with God in the Holy Spirit. It is not through our own initiative that we respond to this call, but only through an undeserved gift which is granted and made known in faith, and which comes to fruition in our love of God and neighbor, as we are led by the Spirit in faith to bear witness to the divine gift in all aspects of our lives (161).

The three dialogue texts here mentioned alone comprise hundreds of pages. They not only have been in part received by the churches, but also have been critically and constructively discussed by theologians and entire theological faculties. As a short consensus text, the JD cannot surpass these more detailed discussions either in quantity or analytical quality. In its size, the JD is a dwarf standing on the shoulders of these larger processes. In its significance, however, the JD is by no means a dwarf. Its special character is that it seeks to take a qualitatively new step from the dialogue documents to an official declaration of consensus. While the earlier dialogue texts were only the products of church appointed commissions, the JD is an invitation to a common and binding affirmation by the churches themselves.

THE HOLY SCRIPTURES AS SOURCE OF THE AGREEMENT (JD 8-12)

Decisive for all theological reflections on the understanding of the doctrine of justification is the biblical message of justification. JD 8-12 presents a description of this message affirmed by Lutherans and Catholics in common.

Especially in the letters of Paul, the biblical concepts "justice" or "righteousness" (*sedāqā-dikaioσύne-iustitia*) and "to justify" (*sdq-dikaion-iustificare*) are important descriptions of the saving action of God. In JD 8-12, however, it should be noted that other concepts can also express the biblical message of justification. JD 9, for example, connects the themes of liberation, reconciliation, peace, new creation, and sanctification with this central message.

JD 10-12 cites the fundamental statements of Paul. Its point of reference is the person fallen under the power of sin and in need of the righteousness or justice which belongs to God and which only God can grant. The gift of this righteousness has its ground in the death and resurrection of Christ. In faith the righteousness won by Christ

is appropriated by the person; the righteousness of God in Christ is communicated to Christians as they believe in the word of God.

Despite its primarily juridical connotations, the phrase "the righteousness of God" for Paul refers to a reality which comprehends and interrelates the various aspects of God's redeeming activity. The righteousness of God effects the forgiveness of sins; it is a gift that brings about acceptance into communion with God; it becomes a power for the Christian, but a power always under the sovereignty of God. In a similar way, "to justify" comprehends this entire process of redemption from the power of sin. In accord with the breadth of the concept "justification," JD 11 can describe justification as the forgiveness of sin and as acceptance into the communion of the Triune God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

The cited biblical texts make evident that the justification of the sinner is the center of Christian faith in a straightforward, everyday sense of "center." It describes the "story" to which Christian faith relates as its abiding ground. In this sense, the doctrine of justification is the core of that which is specifically Christian and thus the general criterion of that which is Christian. For the Lutheran understanding, the biblical message of justification is not to be found only in texts in which the concept "justification" is explicitly used, but also in texts which use other concepts to refer to the same redeeming divine action.

JD 8-12 does not seek to address exegetical controversies, but rather to illustrate the "story" itself, the biblical narrative, and the biblical language. Nevertheless, some reference to the exegetical discussions can be helpful for evaluating what is said.

As is well known, the New Testament uses a wealth of terms to describe the salvation and redemption of humanity. Some churches (e.g., the Orthodox) can shape their proclamation in a biblical way

without an extensively developed doctrine of justification. On this basis, one can in principle say that the doctrine of justification is only one among many varied and complementary biblical possibilities of describing the way of salvation.

For some time, some exegetes have contended that the doctrine of justification is only a "subsidiary crater" (A. Schweitzer) in the theology of Paul, primarily used as a point of differentiation from Judaism. More recently, justification by faith has been understood as a "heuristic category" (E. P. Sanders) by which Paul explained how Gentile Christians could be taken into God's covenant. Such a reading ascribes only a limited theological role to the doctrine of justification.

Other New Testament scholars, however, have not seldom interpreted Paul's doctrine of justification as the central theme of the New Testament (e.g., E. Käsemann, J. Reumann). Such a reading emphasizes that Paul uses the concept in a many sided way to unify the various aspects of the redemptive action of God.

Lutherans have traditionally preferred this second reading. Even Lutheran exegetes, however, today note that the words "righteousness/justification/justify" do not stand at the center of the Bible in a way that marginalizes all other descriptions of salvation. Baptism is central for the New Testament's presentation of God's redemption; along with justification, the related concept of "being in Christ" has a decisive significance for Paul. Both baptism and the idea of "being in Christ" are deeply embedded in Lutheran as well as Catholic theology.

In a more general sense, one could also describe "the gospel" or "Jesus Christ" as the center of the Scriptures. JD 1 cites Article II.1 of the Smalcald Articles as an example of the view that the doctrine of justification is the "first and chief article" of Christian teaching. What this text actually speaks of, however, is the work of Christ.

For Luther, the message about Christ and the message of justification are synonymous.

One thus should differentiate between the message of justification in a narrow sense, which uses the concepts "righteousness/justification/justify" to describe the salvation accomplished and communicated by God to humanity, and the message of justification in a broad sense, which proclaims this salvation with other concepts. The concepts "righteousness" and "justification" should not and cannot be played off against other central biblical concepts of salvation. Within the JD, the message and doctrine of justification are usually meant in this comprehensive sense.

The ecumenical documents mentioned in JD 3 consistently deal with the variety with the biblical foundations. For example, the American study "Justification by Faith" contains detailed exegetical passages in which is affirmed, for example, that

Catholics have come to acknowledge that 'righteousness/justification' is more prevalent in NT teaching than has normally been suspected in earlier centuries or among earlier commentators, and that it is an image of prime importance for our expression of the Christ-event or even the gospel" (123).

On the other side, Lutherans grant that the biblical teaching about justification should be handled in a more nuanced way than Lutherans have often done (123) and that they have become more conscious of the theological differences within the New Testament (147).

The German study, *The Condemnations of the Reformation Era*, also contains exegetical background material in which it was stated, with a reference to the American study, "that a broad exegetical consensus exist today on the biblical understanding of 'righteousness' and 'justification' (*Lehrverurteilungen-kirchentrennend II: Materialien*, ed. K. Lehmann, 1989, 186).

COMMENTARY ON CHAPTER 3 OF THE JD: THE COMMON UNDERSTANDING OF JUSTIFICATION

Without going into details, Chapter 3 presents a shared understanding of justification (JD 18, with its comments on distinct Lutheran and Catholic positions, is an exception here). Chapter 4 then takes up more detailed questions. JD 15 and 16 (content of the common understanding) and JD 17 and 18 (relative importance of the message and doctrine of justification) respectively belong closely together.

JD 15 contains two descriptions of justification. The first views justification from the perspective of the action of the triune God; the second from the perspective of the justified person. "The Father sent his Son into the world to save sinners." The persons for whom this sending occurs are understood as sinners; the goal of the sending is the salvation of sinners. Thus, Christ is made by God to be righteousness for them (cp. 1 Cor 1:30). The Holy Spirit gives them a part in Christ, their righteousness, by the will of the Father; so they are justified. Because of this, we can confess together: "By grace alone, in faith in Christ's saving work and not because of any merit on our part, we are accepted by God." Because justification is the work of the triune God, it occurs by grace alone. Because it occurs by grace alone, faith corresponds to it on the human side. Merit is thus excluded (cp. Rom 3:24,28; Gal 2:16). The word "only" is not explicitly attached to "in faith," but the exclusion of all merit brings the text very close to such a statement. Acceptance by God is closely connected to the reception of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit not only grants us participation in Christ, but is also himself a gift. As gift, the Spirit is active as the One who "renews our hearts while equipping and calling us to good works." Some Lutherans have doubts about saying that the Spirit *calls* to good works, because Paul says of the Holy Spirit: "All who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God" (Rom 8:14). They argue that "call" presupposes that the believer does not immediately

desire and do the will of God and this would be a sign of sin. The language of "call" in the New Testament, however, clearly spoken in the Spirit, does not sound this way (cp., for example, Gal 5:25; and also below on JD 37). Important here is that acceptance and renewal are differentiated while also being seen as inseparable.

In JD 16, *one* element out of the entirety of justification is especially considered: faith. Faith as the reception of salvation corresponds to the "by Christ alone" of justification. Faith not only receives salvation as a gift, but is itself a gift of God, the work of the Holy Spirit in the person who is thus made one of the faithful. This occurs as the Spirit is active in Word and Sacrament. This Word is preached in the community of believers as there also the sacraments are administered. Because faith receives salvation and is itself the work of the ever creative Spirit, it is always bound up with the renewal of life. This renewal is only in a beginning stage during life on this earth; God will bring it to completion in eternal life.

JD 17 speaks of the message of justification; JD 18 of the doctrine of justification. Theological discussions have not always used and differentiated these two expressions consistently. In the JD, "message of justification" refers to the biblical message, as presented in Chapter 1 (earlier drafts of the JD spoke explicitly of the "*biblical* message of justification"). The "doctrine of justification . . . takes up and explicates" this message, as JD 18 says; that is, it theologically reflects on and systematically develops it. Both paragraphs speak of a special role played by the message (in relation to the New Testament witness) or by the doctrine (in relation to the totality of Christian teaching). In the first case, "the message of justification directs us in a special way towards the heart of the New Testament witness." In the second, the doctrine of justification "is an indispensable criterion which constantly serves to orient all the teaching and practice of our churches to Christ." The statement that "the message of justification directs us in a special way towards the heart of the New Testament witness to God's saving

action in Christ," implies no weakening of the significance of this message, as some have thought, as if it were to imply that this message is not the center of the New Testament witness but only directs us toward this center "in a special way." Rather, the expression "message of justification" here is used with those biblical texts in mind that explicitly describe God's saving action with concepts such as "the righteousness of God" or "justify," rather than with other concepts which also speak of the redemptive event. This way of speaking, which JD 17 shares with many modern biblical interpreters, is different from that of Luther, who found the message of justification proclaimed also in texts which did not use the terminology of justification (see above, on JD 8-12). It is said of the message of justification in this narrower sense that it makes visible in a specially clear and precise way the center of the New Testament witness. The message of justification plays this role because of its content. The statement of this content in JD 17 is thus of exceptional importance: "it tells us that as sinners our new life is solely due to the forgiving and renewing mercy that God imparts as a gift and we receive in faith, and never can merit in any way."

JD 18 shows that a full agreement between Lutherans and Catholics does not exist on the function of the doctrine of justification as criterion for the teaching and practice of the church. They agree that the doctrine of justification stands in an organic relation to other parts of Christian teaching: to the doctrine of the Trinity, since the event of justification is an act of the triune God; to Christology, since Christ, who suffered, died, and rose for us is our justification; to ecclesiology and the doctrine of the sacraments, since the Holy Spirit uses word and sacrament to awaken and maintain faith. The most important shared statement in JD 18 is that the doctrine of justification is "an indispensable criterion." This means that no teaching or practice of the church is to contradict the doctrine of justification as presented in the JD. Were such a contradiction to occur, then such a teaching or practice would be

grace and the forgiveness of sins. This conception, sharply criticized by Luther, is here excluded. It is said that the sinner is free "in relation to persons and the things of this world," but this freedom is "no freedom in relation to salvation." The basic assertion states: "Justification takes place solely by God's grace." This implies that sinners are incapable "of meriting their justification before God, or of attaining salvation by their own abilities." It is even excluded that sinners might be capable "of turning by themselves to God to seek deliverance." Whoever is acquainted with the controversies of the Reformation period will recognize the fundamental progress here achieved.

Differences within this commonality become clear when the question is raised how the person participates in the event of justification by grace. Catholics speak of "cooperation." This word is certainly open to misunderstanding. It is here made more precise in three ways: it is a matter of "personal consent"; it is "itself an effect of grace"; and, negatively, it is "not an action arising from innate human abilities." It is thus clear that the agreement in JD 19 is not eliminated, even if Lutherans do not speak of "cooperation" when they say that "believers are fully involved personally in their faith."

In JD 21, which presents the Lutheran understanding, the reason is given why persons cannot cooperate in their own individual redemption: "as sinners they actively oppose God and his saving action." Only when the creative Word of God makes the old person a new person through faith can the person be completely "involved" in justification. *This* "involvement", however, is a basic Lutheran concern, as the incessant insistence on the necessity of faith shows. Because this involvement is worked by the Word of God, one cannot speak of "contributing to one's own justification." Catholics for their part agree with this, since they explicitly deny that the "personal consent" referred to as "cooperation" (JD 20) is "an action arising from innate human abilities."

The title of section 4.1 ("Human Powerlessness and Sin in Relation to Justification") is perhaps not altogether fortunate, since little is said in this section about sin as such. But this was not the *specific* object of controversy which is *here* being discussed. The disputed question was far more whether sinners could turn to God or attain salvation by *their own powers*. This issue is addressed by the emphasis on human *powerlessness*. The title of this section was chosen in order to show that sin is not simply a matter of such powerlessness. For Lutherans, it is particularly important to say (JD 21) that sin is not just this powerlessness, but is also opposition to and rebellion against God. For Catholics also, however, sin is not adequately described as only this powerlessness; that is only *one aspect* of sin.

ON 4.2: "JUSTIFICATION AS FORGIVENESS OF SINS AND MAKING RIGHTEOUS"

In controversial theology during and since the Reformation, justification is often presented either as forgiveness of sins or as making righteous. The first option is ascribed to Lutherans; the second to Catholics. The common formulation of JD 22 binds together "these two aspects of God's gracious action" which are not to be separated from each other. The first two sentences of the paragraph state this interrelation twice. In each case, God is the subject: a) God forgives sin by grace and "at the same time" frees from the enslaving power of sin (see Rom 6, esp. 17-18) and grants new life in Christ (see Rom 6:3f); b) faith is understood as participation in Christ; it is then said of believers that God does not impute to them their sin—in the common statement the forgiveness of sin is understood as non-imputation—and that God (!) "through the Holy Spirit effects in them an active love." The two aspects of God's gracious action, forgiveness of sin and making righteous, are seen as bound together in Christ, with whom the Christian is united through faith: Christ "who became for us . . . righteousness and

sanctification and redemption" (1 Cor 1:30). It is thus clear that the renewal of life, unlike the forgiveness of sins, is not complete on earth, but is completed by God only in eternal life (cp. JD 16).

JD 23 elaborates two Lutheran conceptions in relation to (Catholic) misunderstandings: a) The statement that the righteousness of Christ is our righteousness seeks to emphasize that righteousness is given us before God in Christ through the *declaration* of forgiveness and that the life of the believer is renewed "only in union with Christ." b) That Lutherans conceive of the grace of God as forgiving love or as the favor of God and not as created grace (the Catholic conception of the created effect of the love of God within the person) does not mean that they believe that the grace of God remains external to the person or that they deny "the renewal of the Christian's life." Rather they wish to emphasize that "justification remains free from human cooperation and is not dependent on the life-renewing effects of grace in human beings."

JD 24 shows that Catholics wish to emphasize something different than Lutherans, without excluding the Lutheran emphasis (and vice-versa). Catholics place in the foreground that "God's forgiving grace always brings with it a gift of new life." This affirmation does not deny, however, "God's gift of grace in justification remains independent of human cooperation."

ON 4.3: "JUSTIFICATION BY FAITH AND THROUGH GRACE"

While 4.2 deals with conflicts over how to understand justification in terms of God's action (as forgiveness of sins or as making righteous?), 4.3 relates to justification in terms of the justified person ("justification by faith and through grace"). In fact, the common statement in JD 25 speaks only of faith; only in the presentation of the Catholic understanding in JD 27 is grace (in the person) explicitly discussed. It is there taken up in a way that seeks to avoid widely shared misunderstandings.

Of faith, Catholics and Lutherans together confess that sinners are "justified by faith in the saving action of God in Christ." This faith is more precisely understood as "trust in God's gracious promise" which declares to the person God's saving action. As trust, this faith includes hope and love toward God. This love toward God is to be differentiated from the love through which faith is active. Because it belongs to faith to be active in love (in this latter sense), it cannot remain without good works. The last sentence of JD 25 is of great importance in rightly understanding this assertion and merits particular attention: "Whatever in the justified precedes or follows the free gift of faith is neither the basis of justification nor merits it." Correspondingly, salvation is granted to the sinner by the Spirit in baptism in such a way that it not only intersects his or her biography at a certain moment, but also "lays the basis for the whole Christian life."

JD 26 seeks to explain why "faith alone" (*sola fide*) is fundamental for the Lutheran understanding of justification: "In faith they [believers] place their trust wholly in their Creator and Redeemer and thus live in communion with him." Since the issue here is justification, it would have been more precise to say that because God meets the sinner with the word of promise (the forgiveness of sin), trust is then the only appropriate answer to such a God and such a promise. God effects this trust through the divine creative word. Since this effects a new creation, "it affects all dimensions of the person and leads to a life in hope and love." So it becomes clear that justification and the renewal of life are to be differentiated and that "justification by faith alone" refers to the basis from which such renewal follows. Because, as Luther says, Christ is present in faith, the relation between justification and renewal can also be seen in the Christ present in faith (cp. JD 22).

For the Catholic understanding of justification (JD 27), the concept of justifying grace is of particular importance. When God's love reaches and justifies the sinner, it has a creative effect: the created

grace of justification. The concept “created grace” is not used in the JD because it has often been misunderstood by Lutherans as making grace a “thing” within the person. Justifying grace is the grace whereby the sinner becomes a child of God. Through it the justified receive faith, hope, and love from Christ. It is thus made clear that justifying grace concerns a “new personal relation to God” and not some sort of “object.” Justifying grace is also not something that rests within itself. The “new personal relation” (which this grace is) is based “totally on God’s graciousness and remains constantly dependent on the salvific and creative working of this gracious God, who remains true to himself, so that one can rely upon him.” That this grace abides is strictly a function of God’s faithfulness to himself. This grace “never becomes a human possession to which one could appeal over against God.” All the more so, then, the renewal of life by justifying grace is “always dependent on God’s unfathomable grace and contributes nothing to justification about which one could boast before God (Rom 3:27).” The first sentence of JD 27 speaks of the fundamental significance of faith for justification also according to the Catholic understanding. This sentence in connection with a chapter of the Decree on Justification of the Council of Trent (DH 1530), is oriented toward the baptism of adults who are brought to baptism as catechumens—and thus as hearers of the word—and so are justified in baptism as believers, as persons who have come to faith.

ON 4.4: “THE JUSTIFIED AS SINNER”

The question of “the justified as sinner” has presented special difficulties for the dialogues. The Council of Trent stated that the desires of the justified are no longer truly sin (see DH 1515), while the Lutheran Confessions state that they are (see Apology II.35-45). The issue behind the disagreement is complicated. On the one hand, the two sides do not use the word “sin” in the same way and so are not involved in a straightforward contradiction. On the

other hand, this differing use is itself a problem. If the two sides use the word “sin” to refer to quite different things, the question arises whether they also then understand the situation of the justified person in different ways. Even if direct contradiction is avoided, one must then show how one can speak of an agreement in this area, despite the different understandings of sin.

The jointly affirmed paragraph (JD 28) begins with baptism. According to JD 25, baptism is the “basis” for “the whole Christian life” of the believer. Through baptism, the Holy Spirit unites the person with Christ, justifies, and renews. So (the “but” at the beginning of the second sentence of JD 28 is not altogether appropriate) “the justified must all through life constantly look to God’s unconditional justifying grace” (cp. also JD 27). That the renewal of the Christian is incomplete is described in two ways: a) The justified are “continuously exposed to the power of sin still pressing its attacks (cf. Rom 6:12-14).” Here sin appears as something coming from “outside,” seeking power over the person. b) The justified “are not exempt from a lifelong struggle against the contradiction to God within the selfish desires of the old Adam (cf. Gal 5:16; Rom 7:7-10).” Here the opposition to God “within” the person is at its destructive work. While Catholics and Lutherans describe this situation of the justified in a somewhat similar way, they theologically understand it in different ways in relation to sin (see below). They can say together that the justified must “daily” pray for forgiveness, as is said in the Lord’s Prayer and 1 Jn 1:9, and are ever again called to new conversion, repentance, and forgiveness. From a Lutheran perspective, the beginning and end of this paragraph fit well together, since for Luther the Christian life (and especially repentance) is always a new return to baptism.

Lutherans understand “the contradiction to God within the selfish desires of the old Adam” (and the Christian always also remains the old Adam) as sin. The law, understood theologically or spiritually, requires the person’s *whole* heart, that is, the *totality* of the

person's love of and trust in God. Despite the beginnings of renewal, the justified in fact do not love and trust with such a whole heart. As not *totally* turned toward God in such love and trust, the justified person is a sinner *as a whole*. Because God forgives sin through the word and sacrament of forgiveness, this person is *as a whole* justified, because the forgiving love of God takes in the entire person. The Christian is righteous through the word of forgiveness and in the sight of the Gospel. The law, however, directs the sight of the justified toward themselves so that they are confronted with God's claim upon the whole heart and so are shown to be sinners (see JD 32). But, even if the justified are sinners in this sense, their sin is "ruled" by Christ (see Rom 6:12-14), that is, it need not be manifested and embodied in particular sinful acts. Thus, the justified "can in part lead a just life." And because those born again through baptism and the Spirit are forgiven in the daily return to baptism, their sin, as forgiven, no longer separates them from God.

For the Catholic conception (JD 30), sins are forgiven in baptism in such a way that the person is no longer separated from God and worthy of damnation (cp. Rom 8:1). Since sin is that which separates one from God and makes one worthy of damnation, the person who is not separated from God is not (in this sense) a sinner. This statement in no way denies that there is within the justified an inclination in opposition to God which "does not correspond to God's original design for humanity and . . . is objectively in contradiction to God and remains one's enemy in lifelong struggle." But, because the justified person as such is not separated from God, this opposition to God cannot be sin in an authentic sense. It becomes sin through a "personal element," a conscious and voluntary permitting and willing of that which is opposed to God. This corresponds in part to what Luther called "ruling sin" (cp. Rom 6:12: "Therefore do not let sin exercise dominion in your mortal bodies."), that is, sin which is lived out in particular sinful deeds.

Lutherans and Catholics thus have clearly distinct concepts of sin. Nevertheless, a threefold common affirmation creates the context within which mutual condemnations can be avoided. a) An opposition to God exists within the justified. Even if it is prior to any voluntary decision, this destructive spontaneous element within the baptized faithful is not to be understood as something neutral, but as opposed to God. b) In the justified, this spontaneous element need not come to expression in individual sinful deeds. c) This opposition to God does not itself separate one from God. For Lutherans, of course, this opposition to God within the justified is sin, but it does not separate from God because it is forgiven; for Catholics, it is not sin, because the justified are not separated from God and nothing separating them from God is within them.

Lutheran judgment in this question should keep in mind the significance the interpretation of Romans 7 had for Luther's understanding of sin. The significant majority of modern exegetes do *not* share Luther's interpretation that the "I" in Rom 7:14-24 is that of the *apostle* Paul and not that of the pre-Christian Paul. An argument for Luther's teaching must carefully take up to the biblical conception within a systematic understanding.

ON 4.5: "LAW AND GOSPEL"

Section 4.5 is not as directly related to a specific controversy as the other sections. No Catholic condemnations relate to the law-gospel distinction as such. Rather, they relate to the binding character of God's commandments for the justified and whether and in what sense Christ is to be understood as a lawmaker (cp. canons 18-21; DH 1568-1571). It is affirmed together that the commandments "retain their validity for the justified," even though they are justified by faith in the gospel, "apart from works prescribed by the law" (Rom 3:28) and that Christ "by his teaching and example expressed God's will" also for the justified (JD 31). According to

the Formula of Concord, "Christ takes the law into his hands and explains it spiritually" (SD V.10). The Lutheran conception of the theological use of the law was already discussed above in relation to JD 29. Catholics emphasize (JD 33) that "Christ is not a lawgiver in the manner of Moses," because the law as a way to salvation has been "fulfilled and overcome through the gospel" (cp. JD 31: Christ has fulfilled and overcome the law).

ON 4.6: "ASSURANCE OF SALVATION"

The question of the assurance of salvation is an essential one for the Lutheran understanding of faith. Faith is the assurance of salvation because it is effected by the Word of God alone through the Holy Spirit. Because the Council of Trent had a different concept of "faith," it did not adequately understand the Lutheran conception. Is a common affirmation nevertheless possible?

In the first *jointly* affirmed sentence of JD 34, the theme is immediately addressed through the pairing of the promise of God and reliance upon this promise. Believers can depend on the mercy of God which comes to humanity in God's promise. Faith is here understood as trust. The second sentence then speaks of threats to this faith. Assurance is not security, blind to the dangers which threaten faith. Nevertheless, one can truly speak of a being "sure," based "on the effective promise of God's grace in Word and Sacrament." This pledge is effective "on the strength of Christ's death and resurrection." This "building" on the pledge of God and the assurance it entails takes up the Lutheran concern. That the assurance is possible "on the strength of Christ's death and resurrection" implies that it has its ground in God and not in something human. If JD 34 were a purely Lutheran statement, the "can" in both sentences would be replaced with a "should" (in a non-moral sense; cp. JD 35). Nevertheless, this "can" is of great significance, because Trent, working from a different understanding of faith, had seemed to exclude the possibility of an assurance of faith.

JD 35 takes up the Lutheran differentiation between "assurance" and "security." Looking at Christ and his pledge, believers are sure of their salvation, but "are never secure looking at themselves."

In JD 36, the first sentence is of particular importance: "Catholics can share the concern of the Reformers" in faith "to look away from one's own experience, and to trust in Christ's forgiving word *alone* (cf. Mt 16:19; 18:18)" (emphasis added). Only in this way is assurance possible and effective. On the basis of 1 Cor 4:4, it was clear to both Luther and the theologians of the Middle Ages that introspection can never lead to assurance. While Cardinal Cajetan in 1518 met Luther's understanding of the assurance of salvation with the words, "This is to construct a new church," it merits significant notice that today Catholics say that they can share Luther's concern, rightly understood. That this is actually so is warranted by a reference to the Second Vatican Council: faith is not a form of knowledge, but rather means "to entrust oneself totally to God," the God "who liberates us from the darkness of sin and death and awakens us to eternal life." From this, the important consequence is drawn: "In this sense, one cannot believe in God and at the same time consider the divine promise untrustworthy." The "divine promise" here must be identical with "Christ's promise" mentioned in the description of the concern of the Reformers and must have the same meaning. The subject here is then not simply the universal divine will to save (God "desires everyone to be saved"; 1 Tim 2:4), but rather the promise declared to the individual: "Your sins are forgiven," as the reference to Mt 16:19 and 18:18 shows. These biblical passages had a guiding influence within the development of Luther's understanding of the effective word of promise. Just as Lutherans say (JD 35) that believers "are never secure looking at themselves," so now Catholics say: "Every person, however, may be concerned about his salvation when he looks upon his own weaknesses and shortcomings." This uncertainty on the basis of self-perception is not, however, the last

word and is not that which is emphasized. Rather, even if believers recognize their own failures, "the believer may yet be *certain* that God intends his salvation" (emphasis added). Thus, in light of what was said above, the emphasis must lie on "*his* salvation."

ON 4.7: "THE GOOD WORKS OF THE JUSTIFIED"

The final theme discussed concerns the good works of the justified. Two joint affirmations are offered: 1) Good works are the fruit of justification and follow from it necessarily. 2) "Since Christians struggle against sin their entire lives," they are admonished by Jesus and the apostolic Scriptures "to bring forth the works of love." Here an "obligation" is spoken of, unusual language for Lutheran ears. The Lutheran Confessions, however, speak with some frequency of a "should" and a "must" in relation to the good works of the Christian (e.g., CA XII; FC, Epitome, IV,8).

JD 38 presents the Catholic understanding. Good works are works "made possible by grace and the working of the Holy Spirit." Two things are said about these works: 1) They "contribute to growth in grace." This statement is made more precise by adding that through such works "the righteousness that comes from God is preserved and communion with Christ is deepened." The word "preserved" here does not contradict what was said in JD 27, that grace as a new personal relation to God "remains constantly dependent on the salvific and creative working of this gracious God." Rather, "preserved" here means that good works as works which correspond to the righteousness given and maintained by God prevent this righteousness from being lost through actions or omissions by Christians directed against communion with God. "Growth in grace" here implies a deepening of communion with Christ. This growth does not imply that less grace is present at first and then more later. Grace is either present as a whole or not present at all. The point is rather that grace comes to grasp and determine a person in a more intensive and deep way. An analogy here can be help-

ful: all that a husband and wife do toward and with one another out of love presupposes that love and at the same time makes that love deeper, more intense, more lively.

2) Catholics speak of the "meritorious" character of good works" because "according to the biblical witness, a reward in heaven is promised to these works." This statement is further specified in three ways: a) The "responsibility of persons for their actions" is thus emphasized; b) "The character of those works as gifts" and as fruits of the righteousness given is not thereby denied; c) In particular it is not thereby denied "that justification always remains the unmerited gift of grace" (cp. also the last sentence of JD 25).

Although a detailed examination of the JD against the standard of the Confessions stands behind our commentary, this examination cannot be presented here in detail. Nevertheless, one example should be given of such an examination. The Formula of Concord contradicts in terms of its wording the formulation of the Catholic conception in JD 38 ("According to Catholic understanding, good works, made possible by grace and the working of the Holy Spirit, contribute to growth in grace, so that the righteousness that comes from God is preserved and communion with Christ is deepened."): "Since it is evident from the Word of God that faith is the proper and the only means whereby righteousness and salvation are not only received but also preserved by God, we rightly reject the decree of the Council of Trent . . . that our good works preserve salvation, or that our works either entirely or in part sustain and preserve either the righteousness of faith that we have received or even faith itself" (SD IV.35; cp. canon 24 of Trent's Decree on Justification [DH 1574]). If we wish to judge the issue here rightly, we must remember from above: a) According to JD 27, "justifying grace never becomes a human possession" because it is "*constantly* dependent on the salvific and creative working of this gracious God" and, as the "new personal relation to God," is "grounded

totally on God's graciousness" (emphasis added). In a positive sense, grace and righteousness solely from God are thus maintained. b) While works intentionally directed against God destroy the saving relation to God, this relation is "preserved" by good works ("made possible by grace and the working of the Holy Spirit," JD 38) *in the sense that* they exclude such acts which depart from God. "Preserve" does not here mean "to maintain" in a positive sense but rather the avoidance of that which would destroy what God has maintained. This corresponds to what is said in the Formula of Concord (SD IV.33), quoting the Apology (XX.13): "Peter teaches why we should do good works, namely, that we confirm our calling, that is, that we do not fall from our calling by lapsing again into sin. He says: 'Do good works so that you remain in your heavenly calling, lest you fall away and lose the Spirit and his gifts, which you have not received because of your subsequent works but which have come to you by grace through Christ and which you retain through faith! Faith, however, does not remain in those who lead a wicked life, lose the Holy Spirit, and reject repentance.'" c) Canon 24 (DH 1574) describes good works as "cause" only in relation to the growth of justification, not in relation to the preservation of grace. JD 38 interprets this growth as the deepening of communion with Christ. The Apology (IV.189; translation of German version) speaks in a very similar way: "Therefore good works should follow faith as thanksgiving to God, that faith may thereby be exercised, grow, and increase, and that our confession and good conversation might be called to the mind of others." If we pay close attention to what is meant by "preserve," we see that the cited critique in the Formula of Concord does not touch the Catholic understanding described in JD 38.

In JD 39, the Lutherans state that they also hold "the concept of a preservation of grace and a growth in grace." When they emphasize "that righteousness as acceptance by God" is always complete, but "that there can be growth in its effects in Christian living," they are

saying something not far from the above described Catholic concept of "growth in faith." Along with the Apology (IV.275) and the Formula of Concord (SD.IV.38), they understand good works as "fruits and signs of justification," but not as "merits." When, in line with the New Testament, they speak of eternal life as "reward," they understand this as paradoxical speech. It is an unmerited reward, "in the sense of the fulfillment of God's promise to the believer." Paradoxical speech here is required, since a concept taken from human communal life is being applied to the relation of a person to God.

COMMENTARY ON CHAPTER 5 OF THE JD: THE SIGNIFICANCE AND SCOPE OF THE CONSENSUS REACHED

JD 40 and 41 summarize the conclusions to be drawn from what is confessed together in the Declaration and from what is said there individually by Lutherans and Catholics. The conclusion is two-fold: first, the claim of a consensus in the basic truths of the doctrine of justification (JD 40); and second, the judgment that the doctrinal condemnations of the Reformation era do not touch the teachings of the Roman Catholic and Lutheran churches here described (JD 41). These two conclusions go together.

On the one hand, the assertion of a consensus is more far-reaching and comprehensive than the judgment that certain condemnations do not apply to the teaching of the other church. Persons might forgo condemning the teaching of another group without wishing or being able to say that they are in consensus with the other group. The statement that a consensus exists, however, would be senseless if the condemnations remain in place. Consensus and condemnation are mutually exclusive.

On the other hand, the declaration that the sixteenth century condemnations do not apply to the contemporary teaching of the other church in a certain sense presupposes the consensus.

Precisely because we have discovered so much in common between the differently shaped Lutheran and Catholic teachings on justification, we need not and cannot continue in the judgment that the other's doctrine corrupts the gospel and so is church-dividing.

To speak of consensus is not to deny the existing differences, but the insight into the extensive commonalities do make possible a new estimate of their significance. It is thus of great importance that this "consensus in fundamentals" is not located in a pre-linguistic depth but is described in a differentiated way. Spiritual content is never without linguistic form. The Catholic and Lutheran doctrines of justification do speak partially different languages, sometimes using different concepts, sometimes using the same words in different ways, sometimes drawing different distinctions. Nevertheless, that which is common and fundamental is expressed in the JD in a common language (cp. especially JD 15-18, 19, 22, 25, 28, 31, 34, 37).

Since it would be self-contradictory to claim a consensus without also stating that the past condemnations of each other's teachings are no longer applicable, the explicit statement of this non-applicability (as in JD 41) is an essential aspect of establishing that a consensus exists. Conversely, the declaration of non-applicability presupposes the consensus claimed in JD 40. JD 40 and JD 41 thus condition each other.

Because, as JD 18 states, the doctrine of justification is "an indispensable criterion which constantly serves to orient all the teaching and practice of our churches to Christ," JD 43 rightly says: "Our consensus in basic truths of the doctrine of justification must come to influence the life and teachings of our churches. Here it must prove itself." A capacity for discernment is of decisive significance for the use of a criterion. Thus, this influence and testing of the consensus is less a matter of the formal use of the phrase "doctrine of justification as criterion" than it is a matter of an engagement

with the substantive questions listed in JD 43. Here the power of the doctrine of justification to point toward Christ must be discovered and realized. Prior to dialogues with other churches, it is important for the Lutheran churches to undertake a rigorous self-questioning: is their total teaching and practice actually and constantly oriented toward Christ by the doctrine of justification? The insights won in this self-questioning will make possible a dialogue with other churches which is not fixated on formulas but related to the substantive issues.

JD 44 describes the "Joint Declaration" as a "decisive step forward on the way to overcoming the division of the church." This way is directed toward "visible unity." This goal is not further specified. This specification is left to the will of Christ, as is fitting within the prayer that forms the text's last sentence. That Christ wills this unity to be visible can be said without violating God's sovereignty. Faith lives from word and sacrament; word and sacrament are visible or at least perceivable events within the human community. Unity thus cannot be conceived as other than visible, even if nothing more is said in detail about the form visibility should take.

JOINT DECLARATION ON THE DOCTRINE OF JUSTIFICATION 1997

PREAMBLE

1. The doctrine of justification was of central importance for the Lutheran Reformation of the sixteenth century. It was held to be the "first and chief article"¹ and at the same time the "ruler and judge over all other Christian doctrines."² The doctrine of justification was particularly asserted and defended in its Reformation shape and special valuation over against the Roman Catholic Church and theology of that time, which in turn asserted and defended a doctrine of justification of a different character. From the Reformation perspective, justification was the crux of all the disputes. Doctrinal condemnations were put forward both in the Lutheran Confessions³ and by the Roman Catholic Church's Council of Trent. These condemnations are still valid today and thus have a church-dividing effect.
2. For the Lutheran tradition, the doctrine of justification has retained its special status. Consequently it has also from the beginning occupied an important place in the official Lutheran-Roman Catholic dialogue.
3. Special attention should be drawn to the following reports: "The Gospel and the Church" (1972)⁴ and "Church and Justification" (1994)⁵ by the Lutheran-Roman Catholic Joint Commission, "Justification by Faith" (1983)⁶ of the Lutheran-Roman Catholic dialogue in the USA and "The

¹ The Smalcald Articles, II,1; Book of Concord, 292.

² "Rector et iudex super omnia genera doctrinarum" Weimar Edition of Luther's Works (WA), 39, I, 205.

³ It should be noted that some Lutheran churches include only the Augsburg Confession and Luther's Small Catechism among their binding confessions. These texts contain no condemnations about justification in relation to the Roman Catholic Church.

⁴ Report of the Joint Lutheran-Roman Catholic Study Commission, published in *Growth in Agreement* (New York; Geneva, 1984), pp. 168-189.

⁵ Published by the Lutheran World Federation (Geneva, 1994).

⁶ Lutheran and Catholics in Dialogue VII (Minneapolis, 1985).

Condemnations of the Reformation Era – Do They Still Divide?” (1986)⁷ by the Ecumenical Working Group of Protestant and Catholic theologians in Germany. Some of these dialogue reports have been officially received by the churches. An important example of such reception is the binding response of the United Evangelical-Lutheran Church of Germany to the “Condemnations” study, made in 1994 at the highest possible level of ecclesiastical recognition together with the other churches of the Evangelical Church in Germany.⁸

4. In their discussion of the doctrine of justification, all the dialogue reports as well as the responses show a high degree of agreement in their approaches and conclusions. The time has therefore come to take stock and to summarize the results of the dialogues on justification so that our churches may be informed about the overall results of this dialogue with the necessary accuracy and brevity, and thereby be enabled to make binding decisions.
5. The present Joint Declaration has this intention: namely, to show that on the basis of their dialogue the subscribing Lutheran churches and the Roman Catholic Church⁹ are now able to articulate a common understanding of our justification by God’s grace through faith in Christ. It does not cover all that either church teaches about justification; it does encompass a consensus on basic truths of the doctrine of justification and shows that the remaining differences in its explication are no longer the occasion for doctrinal condemnations.
6. Our Declaration is not a new, independent presentation alongside the dialogue reports and documents to date, let alone a replacement of them. Rather, as the appendix of sources shows, it makes repeated reference to them and their arguments.
7. Like the dialogues themselves, this Joint Declaration rests on the conviction that in overcoming the earlier controversial questions and doctrinal

⁷ Minneapolis, 1990.

⁸ “Gemeinsame Stellungnahme der Arnoldshainer Konferenz, der Vereinigten Kirche und des Deutschen Nationalkomitees des Lutherischen Weltbundes zum Dokument ‘Lehrverurteilungen—kirchentrennend?’,” *Ökumenische Rundschau* 44 (1995): 99-102; including the position papers which underlie this resolution, cf. *Lehrverurteilungen im Gespräch*, Die ersten offiziellen Stellungnahmen aus den evangelischen Kirchen in Deutschland (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1993).

⁹ The word “church” is used in this Declaration to reflect the self-understandings of the participating churches, without intending to resolve all the ecclesiological issues related to this term.

condemnations, the churches neither take the condemnations lightly nor do they disavow their own past. On the contrary, this Declaration is shaped by the conviction that in their respective histories our churches have come to new insights. Developments have taken place which not only make possible, but also require the churches to examine the divisive questions and condemnations and see them in a new light.

1. BIBLICAL MESSAGE OF JUSTIFICATION

8. Our common way of listening to the word of God in Scripture has led to such new insights. Together we hear the gospel that “God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life” (Jn 3:16). This good news is set forth in Holy Scripture in various ways. In the Old Testament we listen to God’s word about human sinfulness (Ps 51:1-5; Dan 9:5f; Eccl/Qo 8:9f; Ezra 9:6f) and human disobedience (Gen 3:1-19; Neh 9:16f,26) as well as of God’s “righteousness” (Isa 46:13; 51:5-8; 56:1 [cf. 53:11]; Jer 9:24) and “judgment” (Eccl/Qo 12:14; Ps 9:5f; 76:7-9).
9. In the New Testament diverse treatments of “righteousness” and “justification” are found in the writings of Matthew (5:10; 6:33; 21:32), John (16:8-11), Hebrews (5:1-3; 10:37-38), and James (2:14-26).¹⁰ In Paul’s letters also, the gift of salvation is described in various ways, among others: “for freedom Christ has set us free” (Gal 5:1-13; cf. Rom 6:7), “reconciled to God” (2 Cor 5:18-21; cf. Rom 5:11), “peace with God” (Rom 5:1), “new creation” (2 Cor 5:17), “alive to God in Christ Jesus” (Rom 6:11,23), or “sanctified in Christ Jesus” (cf. 1 Cor 1:2; 1:31; 2 Cor 1:1). Chief among these is the “justification” of sinful human beings by God’s grace through faith (Rom 3:23-25), which came into particular prominence in the Reformation period.
10. Paul sets forth the gospel as the power of God for salvation of the person who has fallen under the power of sin, as the message that proclaims that “the righteousness of God is revealed through faith for faith” (Rom 1:16-17) and that grants “justification” (Rom 3:21-31). He proclaims Christ as “our righteousness” (1 Cor 1:30), applying to the risen Lord

¹⁰ Cf. “Malta Report,” paras. 26-30; *Justification by Faith*, paras. 122-147. At the request of the US dialogue on justification, the non-Pauline New Testament texts were addressed in *Righteousness in the New Testament*, by John Reumann, with responses by Joseph A. Fitzmyer and Jerome D. Quinn (Philadelphia: New York:1982), pp. 124-180. The results of this study were summarized in the dialogue report *Justification by Faith* in paras. 139-142.

what Jeremiah proclaimed about God himself (23:6). In Christ's death and resurrection all dimensions of his saving work have their roots for he is "our Lord, who was put to death for our trespasses and raised for our justification" (Rom 4:25). All human beings are in need of God's righteousness, "since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Rom 2:23; cf. Rom 1:18-3:22; 11:32; Gal 3:22). In Galatians (3:6) and Romans (4:3-9), Paul understands Abraham's faith (Gen 15:6) as faith in the God who justifies the sinner and calls upon the testimony of the Old Testament to undergird his gospel that this righteousness will be reckoned to all who, like Abraham, trust in God's promise. "For the righteous will live by faith (Hab 2:4; cf. Gal 3:11; Rom 1:17). In Paul's letters, God's righteousness is also power for those who have faith (Rom 1:17; 2 Cor 5:21). In Christ he makes it their righteousness (2 Cor 5:21). Justification becomes ours through Christ Jesus "whom God put forward as a sacrifice of atonement by his blood, effective through faith" (Rom 3:25; see 3:21-28). "For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God - not the result of works" (Eph 2:8-9).

11. Justification is the forgiveness of sins (cf. Rom 3:23-25; Acts 13:39; Lk 18:14), liberation from the dominating power of sin and death (Rom 5:12-21) and from the curse of the law (Gal 3:10-14). It is acceptance into communion with God: already now, but then fully in God's coming kingdom (Rom 5:1-2). It unites with Christ and with his death and resurrection (Rom 6:5). It occurs in the reception of the Holy Spirit in baptism and incorporation into the one body (Rom 8:1-2, 9-11; 1 Cor 12:12-13). All this is from God alone, for Christ's sake, by grace, through faith in "the gospel of God's Son" (Rom 1:1-3).
12. The justified live by faith that comes from the Word of Christ (Rom 10:17) and is active through love (Gal 5:6), the fruit of the Spirit (Gal 5:22). But since the justified are assailed from within and without by powers and desires (Rom 8:35-39; Gal 5:16-21) and fall into sin (1 Jn 1:8,10), they must constantly hear God's promises anew, confess their sins (1 Jn 1:9), participate in Christ's body and blood, and be exhorted to live righteously in accord with the will of God. That is why the Apostle says to the justified: "Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure" (Phil 2:12-13). But the good news remains: "there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus" (Rom 8:1), and in whom Christ lives (Gal 2:20). Christ's "act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all" (Rom 5:18).

2. THE DOCTRINE OF JUSTIFICATION AS ECUMENICAL PROBLEM

13. Opposing interpretations and applications of the biblical message of justification were in the sixteenth century a principal cause of the division of the Western church and led as well to doctrinal condemnations. A common understanding of justification is therefore fundamental and indispensable to overcoming that division. By appropriating insights of recent biblical studies and drawing on modern investigations of the history of theology and dogma, the post-Vatican II ecumenical dialogue has led to a notable convergence concerning justification, with the result that this Joint Declaration is able to formulate a consensus on basic truths concerning the doctrine of justification. In light of this consensus, the corresponding doctrinal condemnations of the sixteenth century do not apply to today's partner.

3. THE COMMON UNDERSTANDING OF JUSTIFICATION

14. The Lutheran churches and the Roman Catholic Church have together listened to the good news proclaimed in Holy Scripture. This common listening, together with the theological conversations of recent years, has led to a shared understanding of justification. This encompasses a consensus in the basic truths; the differing explications in particular statements are compatible with it.
15. In faith we together hold the conviction that justification is the work of the triune God. The Father sent his Son into the world to save sinners. The foundation and presupposition of justification is the incarnation, death, and resurrection of Christ. Justification thus means that Christ himself is our righteousness, in which we share through the Holy Spirit in accord with the will of the Father. Together we confess: By grace alone, in faith in Christ's saving work and not because of any merit on our part, we are accepted by God and receive the Holy Spirit, who renews our hearts while equipping and calling us to good works.¹¹
16. All people are called by God to salvation in Christ. Through Christ alone are we justified, when we receive this salvation in faith. Faith is itself God's gift through the Holy Spirit who works through word and sacrament in the community of believers and who, at the same time, leads believers into that renewal of life which God will bring to completion in eternal life.

¹¹ "All Under One Christ," para. 14, in *Growth in Agreement*, 241-247.

17. We also share the conviction that the message of justification directs us in a special way towards the heart of the New Testament witness to God's saving action in Christ: it tells us that as sinners our new life is solely due to the forgiving and renewing mercy that God imparts as a gift and we receive in faith, and never can merit in any way.
18. Therefore the doctrine of justification, which takes up this message and explicates it, is more than just one part of Christian doctrine. It stands in an essential relation to all truths of faith, which are to be seen as internally related to each other. It is an indispensable criterion which constantly serves to orient all the teaching and practice of our churches to Christ. When Lutherans emphasize the unique significance of this criterion, they do not deny the interrelation and significance of all truths of faith. When Catholics see themselves as bound by several criteria, they do not deny the special function of the message of justification. Lutherans and Catholics share the goal of confessing Christ, who is to be trusted above all things as the one Mediator (1 Tim 2:5-6) through whom God in the Holy Spirit gives himself and pours out his renewing gifts [cf. Sources, section 3]

4. EXPLICATING THE COMMON UNDERSTANDING OF JUSTIFICATION

4.1 *Human Powerlessness and Sin in Relation to Justification*

19. We confess together that all persons depend completely on the saving grace of God for their salvation. The freedom they possess in relation to persons and the things of this world is no freedom in relation to salvation, for as sinners they stand under God's judgment and are incapable of turning by themselves to God to seek deliverance, of meriting their justification before God, or of attaining salvation by their own abilities. Justification takes place solely by God's grace. Because Catholics and Lutherans confess this together, it is true to say:
20. When Catholics say that persons "cooperate" in preparing for and accepting justification by consenting to God's justifying action, they see such personal consent as itself an effect of grace, not as an action arising from innate human abilities.
21. According to Lutheran teaching, human beings are incapable of cooperating in their salvation, because as sinners they actively oppose God and his saving action. Lutherans do not deny that a person can reject the working of grace. When they emphasize that a person can only receive (*mere passive*) justification, they mean thereby to exclude any possibility of contributing to one's own justification, but

do not deny that believers are fully involved personally in their faith, which is effected by God's Word.

4.2 *Justification as Forgiveness of Sins and Making Righteous*

22. We confess together that God forgives sin by grace and at the same time frees human beings from sin's enslaving power and imparts the gift of new life in Christ. When persons come by faith to share in Christ, God no longer imputes to them their sin and through the Holy Spirit effects in them an active love. These two aspects of God's gracious action are not to be separated, for persons are by faith united with Christ, who in his person is our righteousness (1 Cor 1:30): both the forgiveness of sin and the saving presence of God himself. Because Catholics and Lutherans confess this together, it is true to say that:
23. When Lutherans emphasize that the righteousness of Christ is our righteousness, their intention is above all to insist that the sinner is granted righteousness before God in Christ through the declaration of forgiveness and that only in union with Christ is one's life renewed. When they stress that God's grace is forgiving love ("the favor of God"¹²), they do not thereby deny the renewal of the Christian's life. They intend rather to express that justification remains free from human cooperation and is not dependent on the life-renewing effects of grace in human beings.
24. When Catholics emphasize the renewal of the interior person through the reception of grace imparted as a gift to the believer,¹³ they wish to insist that God's forgiving grace always brings with it a gift of new life, which in the Holy Spirit becomes effective in active love. They do not thereby deny that God's gift of grace in justification remains independent of human cooperation. [Cf. Sources, section 4.2]

4.3 *Justification by Faith and through Grace*

25. We confess together that sinners are justified by faith in the saving action of God in Christ. By the action of the Holy Spirit in baptism, they are granted the gift of salvation, which lays the basis for the whole Christian life. They place their trust in God's gracious promise

¹² Cf. WA 8:106; American Edition 32:227.

¹³ Cf. DS 1528.

by justifying faith, which includes hope in God and love for him. Such a faith is active in love and thus the Christian cannot and should not remain without works. But whatever in the justified precedes or follows the free gift of faith is neither the basis of justification nor merits it.

26. According to Lutheran understanding, God justifies sinners in faith alone (*sola fide*). In faith they place their trust wholly in their Creator and Redeemer and thus live in communion with him. God himself effects faith as he brings forth such trust by his creative word. Because God's act is a new creation, it affects all dimensions of the person and leads to a life in hope and love. In the doctrine of "justification by faith alone," a distinction but not a separation is made between justification itself and the renewal of one's way of life that necessarily follows from justification and without which faith does not exist. Thereby the basis is indicated from which the renewal of life proceeds, for it comes forth from the love of God imparted to the person in justification. Justification and renewal are joined in Christ, who is present in faith.
27. The Catholic understanding also sees faith as fundamental in justification. For without faith, no justification can take place. Persons are justified through baptism as hearers of the word and believers in it. The justification of sinners is forgiveness of sins and being made righteous by justifying grace, which makes us children of God. In justification the righteous receive from Christ faith, hope, and love and are thereby taken into communion with him.¹⁴ This new personal relation to God is grounded totally on God's graciousness and remains constantly dependent on the salvific and creative working of this gracious God, who remains true to himself, so that one can rely upon him. Thus justifying grace never becomes a human possession to which one could appeal over against God. While Catholic teaching emphasizes the renewal of life by justifying grace, this renewal in faith, hope, and love is always dependent on God's unfathomable grace and contributes nothing to justification about which one could boast before God (Rom 3:27). [See Sources, section 4.3].

4.4 *The Justified as Sinner*

28. We confess together that in baptism the Holy Spirit unites one with Christ, justifies, and truly renews the person. But the justified must

all through life constantly look to God's unconditional justifying grace. They also are continuously exposed to the power of sin still pressing its attacks (cf. Rom 6:12-14) and are not exempt from a life-long struggle against the contradiction to God within the selfish desires of the old Adam (cf. Gal 5:16; Rom 7:7-10). The justified also must ask God daily for forgiveness as in the Lord's Prayer (Mt. 6:12; 1 Jn 1:9), are ever again called to conversion and penance, and are ever again granted forgiveness.

29. Lutherans understand this condition of the Christian as a being "at the same time righteous and sinner." Believers are totally righteous, in that God forgives their sins through Word and Sacrament and grants the righteousness of Christ which they appropriate in faith. In Christ, they are made just before God. Looking at themselves through the law, however, they recognize that they remain also totally sinners. Sin still lives in them (1 Jn 1:8; Rom 7:17,20), for they repeatedly turn to false gods and do not love God with that undivided love which God requires as their Creator (Deut 6:5; Mt 22:36-40 pr.). This contradiction of God is as such truly sin. Nevertheless, the enslaving power of sin is broken on the basis of the merit of Christ. It no longer is a sin that "rules" the Christian for it is itself "ruled" by Christ with whom the justified are bound in faith. In this life, then, Christians can in part lead a just life. Despite sin, the Christian is no longer separated from God, because in the daily return to baptism, the person who has been born anew by baptism and the Holy Spirit has this sin forgiven. Thus this sin no longer brings damnation and eternal death.¹⁵ Thus, when Lutherans say that justified persons are also sinners and that their opposition to God is truly sin, they do not deny that, despite this sin, they are not separated from God and that this sin is a "ruled" sin. In these affirmations, they are in agreement with Roman Catholics, despite the difference in understanding sin in the justified.
30. Catholics hold that the grace of Jesus Christ imparted in baptism takes away all that is sin "in the proper sense" and that is "worthy of damnation" (Rom 8:1).¹⁶ There does, however, remain in the person an inclination (concupiscence) which comes from sin and presses toward sin. Since, according to Catholic conviction, human sin always involves a personal element and since this element is lacking in this inclination, Catholics do not see this inclination as sin in an authentic sense. They

¹⁴ Cf. DS 1530.

¹⁵ Cf. Apology II:38-45; Book of Concord, 105f.

¹⁶ Cf. DS 1515.

do not thereby deny that this inclination does not correspond to God's original design for humanity and that it is objectively in contradiction to God and remains one's enemy in lifelong struggle. Grateful for deliverance by Christ, they underscore that this inclination in contradiction to God does not merit the punishment of eternal death¹⁷ and does not separate the justified person from God. But when individuals voluntarily separate themselves from God, it is not enough to return to observing the commandments, for they must receive pardon and peace in the Sacrament of Reconciliation through the word of forgiveness imparted to them in virtue of God's reconciling work in Christ. [see Sources, section 4.4].

4.5 Law and Gospel

31. We confess together that persons are justified by faith in the gospel "apart from works prescribed by the law" (Rom 3:28). Christ has fulfilled the law and by his death and resurrection has overcome it as a way to salvation. We also confess that God's commandments retain their validity for the justified and that Christ has by his teaching and example expressed God's will which is a standard for the conduct of the justified also.
32. Lutherans state that the distinction and right ordering of law and gospel is essential for the understanding of justification. In its theological use, the law is demand and accusation. Throughout their lives, all persons, Christians also, in that they are sinners, stand under this accusation which uncovers their sin so that, in faith in the gospel, they will turn unreservedly to the mercy of God in Christ, which alone justifies them.
33. Because the law as a way to salvation has been fulfilled and overcome through the gospel, Catholics can say that Christ is not a lawgiver in the manner of Moses. When Catholics emphasize that the righteous are bound to observe God's commandments, they do not thereby deny that through Jesus Christ God has mercifully promised to his children the grace of eternal life.¹⁸ [Sources, section 4.5]

4.6 Assurance of Salvation

34. We confess together that the faithful can rely on the mercy and promises of God. In spite of their own weakness and the manifold

¹⁷ Cf. DS 1515.

¹⁸ Cf. DS 1545.

threats to their faith, on the strength of Christ's death and resurrection they can build on the effective promise of God's grace in Word and Sacrament and so be sure of this grace.

35. This was emphasized in a particular way by the Reformers: in the midst of temptation, believers should not look to themselves but look solely to Christ and trust only him. In trust in God's promise they are assured of their salvation, but are never secure looking at themselves.
36. Catholics can share the concern of the Reformers to ground faith in the objective reality of Christ's promise, to look away from one's own experience, and to trust in Christ's forgiving word alone (cf. Mt 16:19; 18:18). With the Second Vatican Council, Catholics state: to have faith is to entrust oneself totally to God,¹⁹ who liberates us from the darkness of sin and death and awakens us to eternal life.²⁰ In this sense, one cannot believe in God and at the same time consider the divine promise untrustworthy. No one may doubt God's mercy and Christ's merit. Every person, however, may be concerned about his salvation when he looks upon his own weaknesses and shortcomings. Recognizing his own failures, however, the believer may yet be certain that God intends his salvation. [See Sources, section 4.6]

4.7 The Good Works of the Justified

37. We confess together that good works – a Christian life lived in faith, hope and love – follow justification and are its fruits. When the justified live in Christ and act in the grace they receive, they bring forth, in biblical terms, good fruit. Since Christians struggle against sin their entire lives, this consequence of justification is also for them an obligation they must fulfill. Thus both Jesus and the apostolic Scriptures admonish Christians to bring forth the works of love.
38. According to Catholic understanding, good works, made possible by grace and the working of the Holy Spirit, contribute to growth in grace, so that the righteousness that comes from God is preserved and communion with Christ is deepened. When Catholics affirm the "meritorious" character of good works, they wish to say that, according to the biblical witness, a reward in heaven is promised to these works. Their intention is to emphasize the responsibility of persons

¹⁹ Cf. DV 5

²⁰ Cf. DV 4.

for their actions, not to contest the character of those works as gifts, or far less to deny that justification always remains the unmerited gift of grace.

39. The concept of a preservation of grace and a growth in grace and faith is also held by Lutherans. They do emphasize that righteousness as acceptance by God and sharing in the righteousness of Christ is always complete. At the same time, they state that there can be growth in its effects in Christian living. When they view the good works of Christians as the fruits and signs of justification and not as one's own "merits", they nevertheless also understand eternal life in accord with the New Testament as unmerited "reward" in the sense of the fulfillment of God's promise to the believer. [See Sources, section 4.7]

5. THE SIGNIFICANCE AND SCOPE OF THE CONSENSUS REACHED

40. The understanding of the doctrine of justification set forth in this Declaration shows that a consensus in basic truths of the doctrine of justification exists between Lutherans and Catholics. In light of this consensus the remaining differences of language, theological elaboration, and emphasis in the understanding of justification described in paras. 18 to 39 are acceptable. Therefore the Lutheran and the Catholic explications of justification are in their difference open to one another and do not destroy the consensus regarding basic truths.
41. Thus the doctrinal condemnations of the 16th century, in so far as they relate to the doctrine of justification, appear in a new light: The teaching of the Lutheran churches presented in this Declaration does not fall under the condemnations from the Council of Trent. The condemnations in the Lutheran Confessions do not apply to the teaching of the Roman Catholic Church presented in this Declaration.
42. Nothing is thereby taken away from the seriousness of the condemnations related to the doctrine of justification. Some were not simply pointless. They remain for us "salutary warnings" to which we must attend in our teaching and practice.²¹
43. Our consensus in basic truths of the doctrine of justification must come to influence the life and teachings of our churches. Here it must prove itself. In this respect, there are still questions of varying importance

²¹ *Condemnations of the Reformation Era*, 27.

which need further clarification. These include, among other topics, the relationship between the Word of God and church doctrine, as well as ecclesiology, authority in the church, ministry, the sacraments, and the relation between justification and social ethics. We are convinced that the consensus we have reached offers a solid basis for this clarification. The Lutheran churches and the Roman Catholic Church will continue to strive together to deepen this common understanding of justification and to make it bear fruit in the life and teaching of the churches.

44. We give thanks to the Lord for this decisive step forward on the way to overcoming the division of the church. We ask the Holy Spirit to lead us further toward that visible unity which is Christ's will.

SOURCES TO THE JOINT DECLARATION ON THE DOCTRINE OF JUSTIFICATION

In parts 3 and 4 of the "Joint Declaration" formulations from different Lutheran-Catholic dialogues are referred to. They are the following documents:

"All Under One Christ," Statement on the Augsburg Confession by the Roman Catholic/Lutheran Joint Commission, 1980, in: *Growth in Agreement*, edited by Harding Meyer and Lukas Vischer, New York/Ramsey, Geneva, 1984, 241-247.

Comments of the Joint Committee of the United Evangelical Lutheran Church of Germany and the LWF German National Committee regarding the document "The Condemnations of the Reformation Era. Do They Still Divide?" in: *Lehrverurteilungen im Gespräch*, Göttingen, 1993 (hereafter: VELKD).

Denzinger-Schönmetzer, *Enchiridion Symbolorum ...* 32nd to 36th edition (hereafter: DS).

Denzinger-Hünemann, *Enchiridion Symbolorum ...* since the 37th edition (hereafter: DH).

Evaluation of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity of the Study *Lehrverurteilungen - kirchentrennend?*, Vatican, 1992, unpublished document (hereafter: PCPCU).

Justification by Faith, Lutherans and Catholics in Dialogue VII, Minneapolis, 1985 (hereafter: USA).

The Condemnations of the Reformation Era. Do they Still Divide ?

Edited by Karl Lehmann and Wolfhart Pannenberg, Minneapolis, 1990 (hereafter: LV:E).

To 3: The Common Understanding of Justification (paras 14 to 18)
(LV:E 68f; VELKD 95)

- "... a faith centered and forensically conceived picture of justification is of major importance for Paul and, in a sense, for the Bible as a whole, although it is by no means the only biblical or Pauline way of representing God's saving work" (USA, no. 146).
- "... Catholics as well as Lutherans can acknowledge the need to test the practices, structures, and theologies of the church by the extent to which they help or hinder 'the proclamation of God's free and merciful promises in Christ Jesus which can be rightly received only through faith' (para. 28)" (USA, no. 153).

Regarding the "fundamental affirmation" (USA, no. 157; cf. 4) it is said:

- "This affirmation, like the Reformation doctrine of justification by faith alone, serves as a criterion for judging all church practices, structures, and traditions precisely because its counterpart is 'Christ alone' (*solus Christus*). He alone is to be ultimately trusted as the one mediator through whom God in the Holy Spirit pours out his saving gifts. All of us in this dialogue affirm that all Christian teachings, practices, and offices should so function as to foster 'the obedience of faith' (Rom. 1:5) in God's saving action in Christ Jesus alone through the Holy Spirit, for the salvation of the faithful and the praise and honor of the heavenly Father" (USA, no. 160).
- "For that reason, the doctrine of justification – and, above all, its biblical foundation – will always retain a special function in the church. That function is continually to remind Christians that we sinners live solely from the forgiving love of God, which we merely allow to be bestowed on us, but which we in no way – in however modified a form – 'earn' or are able to tie down to any preconditions or postconditions. The doctrine of justification therefore becomes the touchstone for testing at all times whether a particular interpretation of our relationship to God can claim the name of 'Christian'. At the same time, it becomes the touchstone for the church, for testing at all times whether its proclamation and its praxis correspond to what has been given to it by its Lord" (LV:E 69).
- "An agreement on the fact that the doctrine of justification is significant not only as one doctrinal component within the whole of our church's

teaching, but also as the touchstone for testing the whole doctrine and practice of our churches, is – from a Lutheran point of view – fundamental progress in the ecumenical dialogue between our churches. It cannot be welcomed enough" (VELKD 9; cf. 157).

- "For Lutherans and Catholics, the doctrine of justification has a different status in the hierarchy of truth; but both sides agree that the doctrine of justification has its specific function in the fact that it is 'the touchstone for testing at all times whether a particular interpretation of our relationship to God can claim the name of "Christian". At the same time it becomes the touchstone for the church, for testing at all times whether its proclamation and its praxis correspond to what has been given to it by its Lord' (LV:E 69). The criteriological significance of the doctrine of justification for sacramentology, ecclesiology and ethical teachings still deserves to be studied further" (PCPCU 96).

To 4.1: Sin and Human Powerlessness in Relation to Justification
(paras 19-21)
(LV:E 42ff; 46; VELKD 77-81; 83f)

- "Those in whom sin reigns can do nothing to merit justification, which is the free gift of God's grace. Even the beginnings of justification, for example, repentance, prayer for grace, and desire for forgiveness, must be God's work in us" (USA, no. 156.3).
- "Both are concerned to make it clear that ... human beings cannot ... cast a sideways glance at their own endeavors ... But a response is not a 'work'. The response of faith is itself brought about through the uncoercible word of promise which comes to human beings from outside themselves. There can be 'cooperation' only in the sense that in faith the heart is involved, when the Word touches it and creates faith" (LV:E 46f).
- "Where, however, Lutheran teaching construes the relation of God to his human creatures in justification with such emphasis on the divine 'monergism' or the sole efficacy of Christ in such a way, that the person's willing acceptance of God's grace – which is itself a gift of God – has no essential role in justification, then the Tridentine canons 4, 5, 6 and 9 still constitute a notable doctrinal difference on justification" (PCPCU 22).
- "The strict emphasis on the passivity of human beings concerning their justification never meant, on the Lutheran side, to contest the full personal participation in believing; rather it meant to exclude any cooperation in the event of justification itself. Justification is the work of Christ alone, the work of grace alone" (VELKD 84,3-8).

To 4.2 : Justification as Forgiveness of Sins and Making Righteous
(paras. 22-24)

(USA, nos. 98-101; LV : E 47ff; VELKD 84ff;
cf. also the quotations to 4.4)

- "By justification we are both declared and made righteous. Justification, therefore, is not a legal fiction. God, in justifying, effects what he promises; he forgives sin and makes us truly righteous" (USA, no. 156,5).
- "Protestant theology does not overlook what Catholic doctrine stresses : the creative and renewing character of God's love; nor does it maintain ... God's impotence toward a sin which is 'merely' forgiven in justification but which is not truly abolished in its power to divide the sinner from God" (LV:E 49).
- "The Lutheran doctrine has never understood the 'crediting of Christ's justification' as without effect on the life of the faithful, because Christ's word achieves what it promises. Accordingly the Lutheran doctrine understands grace as God's favor, but nevertheless as effective power ... 'for where there is forgiveness of sins, there is also life and salvation'" (VELKD 86, 15-23)
- "Catholic doctrine does not overlook what Protestant theology stresses: the personal character of grace, and its link with the Word; nor does it maintain ... grace as an objective 'possession' (even if a conferred possession) on the part of the human being – something over which he can dispose" (LV :E 49).

To 4.3 : Justification by Faith and through Grace (paras. 25-27)
(USA, nos. 105ff; LV:E 49-53 ; VELKD 87-90)

- "If we translate from one language to another, then Protestant talk about justification through faith corresponds to Catholic talk about justification through grace; and on the other hand, Protestant doctrine understands substantially under the one word 'faith' what Catholic doctrine (following 1 Cor. 13:13) sums up in the triad of 'faith, hope, and love'" (LV:E 52).
- "We emphasize that faith in the sense of the first commandment always means love to God and hope in him and is expressed in the love to the neighbour" (VELKD 89,8-11).
- "Catholics ... teach as do Lutherans, that nothing prior to the free gift of faith merits justification and that all of God's saving gifts come through Christ alone" (USA, no. 105).
- "The Reformers ... understood faith as the forgiveness and fellowship with Christ effected by the word of promise itself. This is the ground for

the new being, through which the flesh is dead to sin and the new man or woman in Christ has life (*sola fide per Christum*). But even if this faith necessarily makes the human being new, the Christian builds his confidence, not on his own new life, but solely on God's gracious promise. Acceptance in Christ is sufficient, if 'faith' is understood as 'trust in the promise' (*fides promissionis*)" (LV:E 50).

- Cf. The Council of Trent, Session 6, Chapt. 7 : "Consequently, in the process of justification, together with the forgiveness of sins a person receives, through Jesus Christ into whom he is grafted, all these infused at the same time : faith, hope and charity" (Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils, vol. 2, London/Washington DC, 1990, 673) :
- "According to Protestant interpretation, the faith that clings unconditionally to God's promise in Word and Sacrament is sufficient for righteousness before God, so that the renewal of the human being, without which there can be no faith, does not in itself make any contribution to justification" (LV :E 52).
- "As Lutherans we maintain the distinction between justification and sanctification, of faith and works, which however implies no separation" (VELKD 89,6-8).
- "Catholic doctrine knows itself to be at one with the Protestant concern in emphasizing that the renewal of the human being does not 'contribute' to justification and is certainly not a contribution to which he could make any appeal before God. Nevertheless it feels compelled to stress the renewal of the human being through justifying grace, for the sake of acknowledging God's newly creating power ; although this renewal in faith, hope, and love is certainly nothing but a response to God's unfathomable grace" (LV :E 52f).
- "Insofar as the Catholic doctrine stresses that 'the personal character of grace, and its link with the Word', this renewal ... is certainly nothing but a response effected by God's word itself and that 'the renewal of the human being does not contribute to justification, and is certainly not a contribution to which a person could make any appeal before God' our objection no longer applies" (VELKD 89,12-21).

To 4.4. : The Justified as Sinners (paras. 28-31)
(USA, nos. 102ff; LV:E 44ff; VELKD 81ff)

- "For however just and holy, they fall from time to time into the sins that are those of daily existence. What is more, the Spirit's action does not exempt believers from the lifelong struggle against sinful tendencies.

Concupiscence and other effects of original and personal sin, according to Catholic doctrine, remain in the justified, who therefore must pray daily to God for forgiveness" (USA, no. 102).

- "The doctrines laid down at Trent and by the Reformers are at one in maintaining that original sin, and also the concupiscence that remains, are in contradiction to God ... object of the lifelong struggle against sin ... After baptism, concupiscence in the person justified no longer cuts that person off from God ; in Tridentine language, it is 'no longer sin in the real sense' ; in Lutheran phraseology, it is *peccatum regnatum*, 'controlled sin'" (LV :E 46).
- "The question is how to speak of sin with regard to the justified without limiting the reality of salvation. While Lutherans express this tension with the term 'controlled sin' (*peccatum regnatum*) which expresses the teaching of the Christians as 'being justified and sinner at the same time' (*simul iustus et peccator*), Roman Catholics think the reality of salvation can only be maintained by denying the sinful character of concupiscence. With regard to this question a considerable rapprochement is reached if LV :E calls the concupiscence that remains in the justified a 'contradiction to God' and thus qualifies it as sin" (VELKD 82,29-39).

To 4.5: Law and Gospel (paras. 32-34)

- According to Pauline teaching it refers to the Jewish law as means of salvation. This was fulfilled and overcome in Christ. This statement and the consequences from it have thus to be understood.
- With reference to Canons 19f of the Council of Trent the VELKD (89,28-36) says as follows: "The ten commandments of course apply to Christians as stated in many places of the confessions. If Canon 20 stresses that a 'person ... is bound to keep the commandments of God', this does not apply to us; if however Canon 20 affirms that faith has salvific power only on condition of keeping the commandments this applies to us. Concerning the reference of the Canon regarding the commandments of the church, there is no difference between us if these commandments are only expressions of the commandments of God; otherwise it would apply to us."

To 4.6: Assurance of Salvation (paras. 35-37) (LV :E 53-56 ; VELKD 90ff)

- "The question is : How can, and how may, human beings live before God in spite of their weakness, and with that weakness ?" (LV :E 53):

- "The foundation and the point of departure (of the Reformers) ... are: the reliability and sufficiency of God's promise, and the power of Christ's death and resurrection; human weakness, and the threat to faith and salvation which that involves" (LV:E 56).
- The Council of Trent also emphasizes that "it is necessary to believe that sins are not forgiven, nor have they ever been forgiven, save freely by the divine mercy on account of Christ," and that we must not doubt "the mercy of God, the merit of Christ and the power and efficacy of the sacraments; so it is possible for anyone, while he regards himself and his own weakness and lack of dispositions, to be anxious and fearful about his own state of grace" (Council of Trent, Session 6, chapter 9, 674).
- Luther and his followers go a step farther : They urge that the uncertainty should not merely be endured. We should avert our eyes from it and take seriously, practically, and personally the objective efficacy of the absolution pronounced in the sacrament of penance, which comes 'from outside' ... Since Jesus said, 'Whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven' (Matt. 16 :19), the believer ... would declare Christ to be a liar ... if he did not rely with a rock-like assurance on the forgiveness of God uttered in the absolution ... that this reliance can itself be subjectively uncertain – that the assurance of forgiveness is not a security of forgiveness (*securitas*) ; but this must not be turned into yet another problem, so to speak: the believer should turn his eyes away from it, and should look only to Christ's word of forgiveness" (LV :E 54f).
- "Today Catholics can appreciate the Reformer's efforts to ground faith in the objective reality of Christ's promise, 'whatsoever you loose on earth ...' and to focus believers on the specific word of absolution from sins. ... Luther's original concern to teach people to look away from their experience, and to rely on Christ alone and his word of forgiveness [is not to be condemned]" (PCPCU 24).
- A mutual condemnation regarding the understanding of the assurance of salvation "can even less provide grounds for mutual objection today – particularly if we start from the foundation of a biblically renewed concept of faith. For a person can certainly lose or renounce faith, and self-commitment to God and his word of promise. But if he believes in this sense, he cannot at the same time believe that God is unreliable in his word of promise. In this sense it is true today also that - in Luther's words - faith is the assurance of salvation" (LV :E 56).
- With reference to the concept of faith of Vatican II see Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, no. 5: 'The obedience of faith' ...

must be given to God who reveals, an obedience by which man entrusts his whole self freely to God, offering 'the full submission of intellect and will to God who reveals,' and freely assenting to the truth revealed by Him."

- "The Lutheran distinction between the certitude (*certitudo*) of faith which looks alone to Christ and earthly security (*securitas*), which is based on the human being, has not been dealt with clearly enough in the LV ... Faith never reflects on itself, but depends completely on God, whose grace is bestowed through word and sacrament, thus from outside (*extra nos*)" (VELKD 92,2-9).

To 4.7: The Good Works of the Justified (paras. 38-40)
(LV : E 66ff, VELKD 90ff)

- "But the Council excludes the possibility of earning grace – that is, justification – (can. 2; DS 1552) and bases the earning or merit of eternal life on the gift of grace itself, through membership in Christ (can. 32: DS 1582): Good works are 'merits' as a gift. Although the Reformers attack 'Godless trust' in one's own works, the Council explicitly excludes any notion of a claim or any false security (cap. 16 : DS 1548f). It is evident ... that the Council wishes to establish a link with Augustine, who introduced the concept of merit, in order to express the responsibility of human beings, in spite of the 'bestowed' character of good works" (LV:E 66).
- If we understand the language of "cause" in Canon 24 in more personal terms, as it is done in chapter 16 of the Decree on Justification, where the idea of communion with Christ is emphasized, then we can describe the Catholic doctrine on merit as it is done in the first sentence of the second paragraph of 4.7 : growth in grace, perseverance in righteousness received by God and a deeper communion with Christ.
- "Many antitheses could be overcome if the misleading word 'merit' were simply to be viewed and thought about in connection with the true sense of the biblical term 'wage' or reward" (LV :E 67).
- "The Lutheran confessions stress that the justified person is responsible not to lose the grace received but to live in it ... Thus the confessions can speak of a preservation of grace and a growth in it. If righteousness in Canon 24 is understood in the sense that it effects human beings, then it does not apply to us. But if 'righteousness' in Canon 24 refers to the Christian's acceptance by God, it applies to us; because this righteousness is always perfect ; compared with it the works of Christians are only 'fruits' and 'signs'" (VELKD 94,2-14) .

- "Concerning Canon 26 we refer to the Apology where eternal life is described as reward: ' ... We grant that eternal life is a reward because it is something that is owed - not because of our merits but because of the promise'" (VELKD 94,20-24).

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